Appendix D - Forest Plan Implementation

The Role of the Routt National Forest Plan

The Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Plan) establishes programmatic direction that is used as a framework for decision-making at the project level. As such, the Revised Plan is but one part of a multi-level decisionmaking framework. In order to comply with NEPA, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and other environmental laws, it is necessary to perform site-specific environmental analysis at a second decision or project level. This site-specific analysis is done prior to making a commitment of resources. It is impossible to prepare a forest plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) of sufficient specificity to identify and adequately analyze all projects or activities which may occur in the 10-15 year planning period. The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in Sierra Club v. Robertson, 28 F.3d 753 (8th Cir. 1994) recently described the nature of forest plans:

- A forest plan is, in essence, a programmatic statement of intent that establishes basic guidelines and sets forth the planning elements that will be employed by the Forest Service in future site-specific decisions.

In accomplishing this task, the Revised Plan establishes direction and makes decisions in six areas:

- Goals and objectives for management.
- Forest-wide standards and guidelines.
- Management area prescriptions.
- Land that is suitable for timber production and the allowable sale quantity, and other resource outputs, all of which are estimates.
- Monitoring requirements to help determine how well the standards and management direction are working and whether the goals and objectives remain appropriate throughout the plan period.
- Wilderness recommendations.

Forest Plan Implementation

The Revised Plan is a broad programmatic framework for ecosystem management as outlined above. It describes desired conditions for each of the management areas across the Forest. It also outlines the general type of management activities that may take place in the management areas in order to achieve these desired conditions. The actual management actions and associated resource commitments require a site-specific analysis and decision. Accordingly, these site-specific projects are the tools used in actually implementing the Revised Plan and ecosystem management.

A number of different steps are used to make the transition between forest plan decisions and project or activity-level decisions. These steps have been modified in recent years to address needs at a broader landscape level. The following is a short step-by-step summary of how the Revised Plan may be implemented.

1. Consider ecosystem function and integrity.

In implementing ecosystem management, we must provide for the long-term integrity and function of ecosystems, including their human components. As such, the scale of management actions and associated analysis will vary depending on individual ecosystem needs. In some cases, this means a rather narrow focus. In others, it may mean a landscape-level focus. For example, the simple replacement of a cattle guard should require a rather narrow focus because it impacts little else. On the other hand, watershed restoration requires a much broader perspective because of a wider range of impacts. The spatial and temporal scales used depend on the situation. When a landscape scale, or simply a systematic approach to implementing the Revised Plan is desired, the geographic areas described in Chapter 3 will serve as a basic area for further analysis. When single-purpose projects having little or no effect on other resources are analyzed, a much smaller project area can be delineated.

2. Describe existing conditions - What is the area like now?

In this step data is gathered, and the physical and biological condition of the area is described. Data may come from files, data bases, recovery plans, researchers, surveys, members of the public, and the forest plan.

3. Describe desired conditions - What do we want the area to be like?

Desired conditions for the area are usually generated from the forest plan, public participation, previous analyses, and from evaluations of the current condition. Desired conditions should be based upon ecosystem capability, sustainability, variability, and functions and on human desires and needs. These desired conditions essentially become the management goals for the area.

4. List possible activities

Comparing existing conditions with desired conditions could yield a list of discrepancies. Wherever these discrepancies occur, there are management needs and opportunities. A list of possible management activities should be developed to address these needs and opportunities. This list of possible management activities becomes an inventory of potential proposed actions which could be considered for future detailed environmental analysis.

5. Assess potential proposed actions

The list of potential proposed actions should be sorted into bgical groupings; for example, actions that are similar, connected, or of the same priority. The potential proposed actions or groups of actions should be evaluated for consistency and economic, social, and technical feasibility. Analysis of these actions should not be independent of one another. The proposed actions should be analyzed and implemented so that all ecosystem conditions in the area are moved toward the desired condition. Once again, the geographic areas described in Chapter 3 provide a means for this landscape level of analysis.

6. Prioritize the list of potential proposed actions

Potential actions can then be prioritized based upon purpose and need, feasibility, budgets, targets, opportunity, or best intuition.

7. Select a proposed action or group of actions for site-specific detailed analysis with public involvement throughout:

- Develop the purpose and need for the action.
- Define the scope of the analysis.
- Develop alternatives.
- Analyze the proposed action and alternatives.

8. Document the analysis and make a decision

The appropriate level of environmental and social analysis should be documented in an Environmental Impact Statement, Environmental Assessment, or Categorical Exclusion, depending on the level of significant or nonsignificant environmental impacts. A decision based on this analysis is then made by the appropriate Forest Service official.

9. Implement the action

Carry out the project as described in the decision. This may involve developing work plans and monitoring plans and issuing permits or contracts.

10. Monitor and evaluate the results

Was the action implemented as designed? Did the action achieve the desired results? How can future actions be modified to be more effective? Does the Forest Plan need to be amended? After the action is accomplished, the next step is the "recycling of knowledge." This is an assessment of the success of implementing the action. The Forest Service has an obligation to continually re-assess successes and failures to improve designs. This is known as adaptive management. It is critical to successful implementation of ecosystem management. A review of costs, outputs, effects, and results should be included. The public should be very involved in this assessment.